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Star Legacy Stillbirth Summit 2019 – Oral Presentation Submission

Title: Bringing Baby Home: A Whale Teaches Us About Grief

Abstract:

In 2018, the world watched as Tahlequah, an orca whale located off the Pacific northwest coast of the USA, carried her dead calf for over 1000 miles. Her carrying of her calf and her support from her pod resonated with bereaved parents and families globally. Many bereaved mothers envied her for the time she was able to spend with her baby, for many bereaved families in the Western world do not experience this opportunity.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, a first world Western country, our practices are different. Bereaved parents and families regularly bring home their deceased babies to spend time with them, usually ranging from one to seven days. One of the reasons proposed for this cultural practice is the influence of our indigenous population's funerary traditions. The Māori tangihanga, or customary funeral ritual, sees the deceased person (tūpāpaku) surrounded by family, never left alone and transported to a traditional communal location (marae), sometimes after being at the family home for a period of time.

For those who have grown up with these traditions, Māori and non-Māori alike, this practice is not seen as out of the ordinary. But what about those who have not grown up with these traditions? In this presentation, I present the experiences and views of 'new-New Zealanders', working in the area of pregnancy, baby and infant loss, and faced with a tradition that they are unfamiliar with. Midwives, nurses, obstetricians, neonatologists and funeral directors who have immigrated to New Zealand are interviewed about their experiences of the practice of bringing baby home following a stillbirth, newborn or infant death.

From these experiences we can get a sense of how other countries might approach the practice of bringing baby home, learn what the presumptions and barriers might be, and develop practices that might assist parents in considering spending more time with their deceased baby or child.

From these experiences, bereaved parents might move from empathising with and envying Tahlequah, to sharing her experience and relishing the precious time spent with our beautiful babies.